

A COMPANION TOOLKIT FOR CHILD CARE POLICY & SYSTEMS CHANGE

Building the Grassroots Movement

A best practice guide for organizing families, educators,
and advocates into visible, sustained public will

About this series

This is one of six [companion toolkits](#) created to give advocates, funders, and policymakers practical resources for expanding public investment in child care. They were built from insights drawn from Vermont’s decade-long child care campaign, led by Let’s Grow Kids and Let’s Grow Kids Action Network, which culminated in the 2023 passage of Act 76. For the full story behind the campaign, see New America’s comprehensive case study, [Vermont Needed Child Care; Here’s How They Got It](#).

What follows is a set of best practices, grouped into themes. There is no required order. Every state has its own landscape, needs, challenges, and opportunities. You can determine the approach that works best for you.

This toolkit focuses on grassroots organizing—how a campaign builds a broad base of supporters, turns those supporters into volunteers, and converts that energy into political will.



Photo courtesy of Let’s Grow Kids Action Network, used with permission.

The Politics of Change

Build a 501(c)(3), 501(c)(4), and PACs so your organization can educate and act politically.

Building Legislative Change

Sequence policy asks, build the evidence base, and pass a bill.

➤ Building the Grassroots Movement

Organize families, providers, and advocates into visible, sustained public will.

Engaging the Business Community

Recruit employers as credible messengers and advocates for a publicly funded solution.

The Role of Philanthropy

Catalyze and sustain a funding campaign.

Readying the System

Prepare the child care system for large-scale investment.

Build a broad base of support

Let's Grow Kids made it easy for parents with young children to get involved in the campaign and asked every new supporter to sign a pledge supporting public investment in child care.

- **Start with education.** A decade ago, many Vermonters didn't see early childhood education as a priority. Staff and volunteers crossed the state setting up tables at county fairs, partnering with public libraries, offering spaghetti dinners in town halls and Lions Clubs.

They designed an infographic placemat with brain science facts and ran "Small Talk," a branded van with a mobile recording studio that stopped at events around the state so Vermonters could share their child care stories. Field organizers looked for any event where families with young children were likely to attend and took games, handouts, and petitions with them.

- **Have a call to action.** At every event, ask community members to sign a petition supporting child care. Let's Grow Kids kept the message simple at first, but specified a public investment in child care as the campaign advanced. Ask supporters for their contact information so you can follow up with volunteer opportunities.
- **Build the ladder of engagement.** Many volunteers are teachers or busy parents of young children. Let's Grow Kids was intentional about lowering the barrier for participation. Meetings were scheduled when parents could attend and often included activities and snacks for kids. New volunteers might be asked to sign onto a letter, share something on social media, or contact a lawmaker. As they grew more comfortable, they could advance to public speaking, spending the day at the State House, or organizing other volunteers.

- **Celebrate small wins.** Even in years when no major bill was moving, the campaign asked volunteers to call their representatives to support a budget with, say, an additional \$1 million in child care subsidies. A taste of success made volunteers far more willing to stay involved for the long haul.

Invest in relational and field organizing

In Vermont, a largely rural state, field organizers had to be nimble, adjusting how they approached each community depending on the local political climate.

- **Go where the people are.** Especially in rural areas, Let's Grow Kids never asked volunteers to travel to them. Organizers set up tables at popular festivals—Strolling of the Heifers, Dairy Days, the Quechee Balloon Festival—and at barbecues and pancake breakfasts at child care centers. Every family was asked to sign a petition, which in the early days was a simple pledge that early childhood education matters, but grew more specific over time. "Wherever we went we had a clipboard and petitions," said Shayla Zammuto, former senior field manager for Let's Grow Kids. In 2015, the campaign gathered just a few thousand signatures; by the end of 2018, it had about 30,000.
- **Build a field team, then multiply it through volunteers.** Let's Grow Kids had a team of about six paid field organizers spread across Vermont's 14 counties. The strategy was to train volunteers to be present when a staffer couldn't be, sending volunteers to large events and to smaller communities.
- **Tailor your approach.** Let's Grow Kids approached a business leader differently than a working parent or an early educator. Field organizers got to know volunteers personally—where they worked, how old their kids were, and their organizing strengths. Some people would never write an op-ed but would happily host a

fundraiser at their house. Recruiting volunteers from diverse backgrounds, and keeping those voices aligned on the final legislation, was a priority throughout. The Let's Grow Kids field and policy teams hosted regular meetings across the state with volunteer groups to keep them updated on policy, gather feedback, and provide messaging training.

- **Focus on the “soft middle.”** Some Vermonters—especially in conservative areas—were wary of the campaign's promises. Organizers focused on those who were supportive and on the “soft middle”: the persuadable people who didn't immediately love or hate what the campaign was doing. Let's Grow Kids staffers spent the first few years educating those residents, gathering data, and sharing stories. They also approached trusted local leaders directly to dispel misinformation and build trust.
- **Recruit early childhood educators as trusted messengers.** Let's Grow Kids spent years building relationships with early childhood educators through mentorship and technical assistance programs. With that trust in place, the group made sure educators were included in designing solutions. Some educators joined the Early Childhood Educators Leadership Circle and shared their stories in videos for the campaign's narrative storytelling. Others helped engage the family members of children in their programs.
- **Provide help when needed.** When the pandemic hit in 2020, field organizers pivoted to delivering essentials—toilet paper, cleaning supplies—to child care programs. Beyond keeping centers open, this deepened relationships with early childhood educators who had been skeptical of the campaign's push to overhaul a system they saw as intractable. It “exponentially expanded our network of supporters,” said chief program officer Sherry Carlson.

SEE ALSO: The [Politics of Change](#) toolkit explains how the campaign built political funds and an endorsement process to turn child care into a winning electoral issue.

Cultivate leaders and amplify their voices

Once a broad base exists, give it shape and visibility. Turn supporters into leaders, stage public events, and channel enthusiasm into political will.

- **Convene stakeholders around a shared vision.** In October 2017, Let's Grow Kids co-facilitated the “Building Vermont's Future from the Child Up” summit, drawing more than 250 stakeholders from across the state. Participants helped shape what the rest of the decade-long campaign would look like.
- **Stage moments that show the movement has muscle.** That same year, Let's Grow Kids organized Kids Out Loud in downtown Burlington. The group commissioned an original song, “Something Beautiful,” featuring local artists Kat Wright and Chris Dorman, and taught a choreographed dance to children at child care centers months ahead. When roughly 1,000 people gathered and took over the street—children in colorful superhero capes dancing together—it sent a powerful message.
- **Cultivate a bench of leaders.** In the campaign's later stages, Let's Grow Kids formed a Grassroots Leadership Circle of parents, grandparents, and young people interested in politics, with one from each of the 14 counties. Communications director Noah Futterman would present a menu of ways to take action: writing a letter or op-ed, talking to the press, hosting an event, or testifying at the State House. He tapped these leaders first whenever the campaign needed reliable people to act.
- **Turn public will into political will.** Starting in 2022, when election season arrived, the Let's Grow Kids grassroots network became an electoral force. Volunteers hosted “Be a Child Care Voter” honk-and-waves, knocked on doors in rural counties, and stood on roadsides in the freezing rain to back “child care champions.” The 501(c)(4) Let's Grow Kids Action Network endorsed candidates who were committed child care champions and supported their election campaigns.



Take it further

Read this alongside New America’s [companion toolkits](#), [legislative timeline](#), and [full case study](#), and see these examples from the Vermont campaign:

- [Let’s Grow Kids Action Network’s “Organizers Resource Guide”](#)
- [Let’s Grow Kids’ “Make a Difference by Volunteering as a Child Care Champion”](#)
- [Kids Out Loud’s song, video, and dance moves](#)